



# Double Knit

A Permelia O'Brien Mystery

Arlene Sachitano

Author of the Harriet Truman / Loose Threads Mysteries

*Fifteen minutes later, she heard the front door open. She dropped the dead flowers, brushed her hands together, and picked up the hand-knit hat.*

"But he hasn't gone to any of the hospitals in the area," a woman said.

"It's a pretty big leap to assume he would be with us," Dr. Grace told her in a soft voice.

They came into view on the top step. The woman's face was tear-streaked, and she dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue. Dr. Grace had a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"You said he's only been gone since dinnertime last night, right? You said a friend called him asking for help? Maybe the friend needed more help than expected. Maybe they had to leave town for some reason," Dr. Grace suggested.

"He wouldn't do that without telling me. He knows I worry. Besides, he left his cell phone charging on our dresser. He would have come back to get it. Something horrible has happened. I can feel it."

Permelia stood to the side of the landing, still clutching the hat, as Dr. Grace guided the woman down the stairs. The woman stopped halfway down.

"What are you doing with my husband's hat?" she demanded.

"I found it at our dumpster out back," Permelia said and held it out.

The color drained from the woman's face, and she fainted, tumbling down the two remaining steps and landing on Permelia, knocking her to the pavement.

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# DOUBLE KNIT

*A Permelia O'Brien Mystery*



ARLENE SACHITANO

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DOUBLE KNIT

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***For Cordelia's Knitters***



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# Chapter 1



Permelia O'Brien stood on the tree-lined sidewalk and looked at the building in front of her. It sat in a neighborhood of stately old homes, and if not for a discreet sign that sat to one side of the porte-cochere, she would have never guessed it was the city morgue.

Her oldest daughter Jennifer spun around and glared at her, the silver bangle bracelets stacked on one wrist clanking as she turned.

"You have to be joking. Please tell me you haven't signed anything."

Second daughter Katy smiled, and her eyes lit up.

"Your apartment is on the third floor, right?" She paused, and Permelia nodded. "I think it's fabulous," Katy continued. "This is a great neighborhood. You can walk to lots of stuff from here."

Jennifer tapped her Manolo Blahnik-shod toe on the sidewalk.

"Look at these old sidewalks. Mother, you could fall and break your neck. And the trees will block the streetlights at night, making this a very unsafe place."

Katy looked up and down the street.

"This isn't an unsafe neighborhood. Look at the houses. There are bikes in driveways and kids playing. Mom will be fine. She can make friends here."

"Mother can make plenty of friends at the independent living center. And they have organized activities to ensure the residents do meet people," Jennifer argued.

Katy rolled her eyes at her sister.

"Mom is waaayyy too young for shuffleboard and Wii Bowling."

Permelia cleared her throat and straightened her spine.

"Unless I'm mistaken, I've not been declared incompetent yet, which means this decision is still mine to make. And while I haven't signed any

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paperwork, I've agreed to take the apartment and the job, pending an inspection of the space."

"What job?" both girls said at the same time.

"Well, it's not exactly a job. To rent the apartment, you have to agree to take phone calls for the morgue at night. In return, you get a reduction in your monthly rent."

Her daughters were speechless.

"I'm going in to have a look," Permelia said. "Are you girls coming?"



A cement walk led to a wide flight of steps with Japanese vine maple trees in beds on either side. A small white-haired man came out through the clear glass entry door and waited until the three women reached him. Then he held a hand out to Permelia.

"I'm Dr. Harold Grace, the assistant medical examiner. You must be Mrs. O'Brien.

Permelia took his hand.

"Please, call me Permelia."

He smiled.

"I met you out here so I could show you your private entrance."

"It's not hers yet," Jennifer muttered.

Katy elbowed her; Jennifer rubbed the arm and glared at her sister, but didn't say anything else.

Dr. Grace led them through a small parking lot along the side of the building and then around to the back.

"Here we are." He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked a plain white door. "This parking spot next to the garage is for your use, and you can park in the end spot in the garage."

He held the door open and stood aside to let Permelia and her daughters ascend the stairs then followed them up to a small landing with three doors. He used a second key to open the one directly in front of them.

"The other two doors are storerooms."

"How often will people be up here digging around in those rooms and disturbing my mother?" Jennifer demanded.

Dr. Grace's mouth lifted slightly on the left side.

"I think the last time someone looked in either one of them was about three years ago. It's mostly old records from before we were computerized." He pushed the center door open, and Permelia stepped inside.

Katy stepped past her into an office space.

"I love it," she said and twirled in a circle with her arms out. "Mom, don't you love it?"

"This is where the office phones are, of course," Dr. Grace said and gestured to a built-in desk on the left. "The door here to the right is the bath-



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room and then one of the two bedrooms. The door to the left beyond the desk is the second bedroom. It's slightly smaller but has its own bath." He continued into the center of the apartment. "As you can see, this is the kitchen and then the living and dining area."

Permelia crossed through the kitchen and into the living / dining area.

"It has a very lovely view and is quite spacious."

"Our building is on the National Register of Historic Homes," Grace said proudly. "And she's been very well cared for."

Jennifer tapped a manicured forefinger on her pursed lips.

"How is the...odor when you're working downstairs?"

"Jen," Katy scolded her sister.

Dr. Grace smiled at Katy.

"It's a reasonable question, but not to worry. Our workspaces are very well ventilated, and the air in our examination rooms is routed through scrubbers."

Jennifer spun on her heel and strode back to the entrance door.

"I think it's cool," Katy told her mother. "I can see you sitting in the front window with your spinning wheel or your knitting needles."

"It is a very lovely space," Permelia said thoughtfully. "Could you tell me a little more about the phone calls?"



Permelia put her checkbook and pen back in her purse and stood up. Dr. Grace slipped her check and the lease agreement she'd signed into the top drawer of his desk. He came around the desk and handed her two sets of keys.

"The big key opens the downstairs door, and the smaller brass key unlocks the garage; the one with the green rubber around the top is the apartment key. I've given you a spare set just in case."

"How soon may I move in?" Permelia asked as she dropped the keys into her purse.

Grace smiled.

"This afternoon, if you'd like."

"I'm afraid my things haven't arrived yet. Will Saturday work?"

"That's perfect. Unless something unusual happens, the parking lot will be empty, so you'll have room to maneuver a truck. I assume you will have a truck?"

"Yes, my son is driving it over Friday night."

"Well, welcome to Pearson House. If any questions arise, you have my number."

"Thank you."

Permelia left the office of the assistant medical examiner and exited through the front door. Katy and Jennifer were waiting on the porch.

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“Congratulations on your new home,” Katy said and hugged her.

“I think you can break the contract in the first three days without penalty, Mother,” Jennifer said. “Please promise me you’ll at least think about it.”

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## Chapter 2



In a city known for its rain, Saturday morning dawned clear and sunny. Permelia stood by her apartment door and watched as her eldest child, Jennifer's twin, Michael O'Brien Junior, guided the box truck full of her furniture and possessions into the driveway at nine o'clock sharp, as they'd agreed.

The truck's passenger door opened, and Michael's teen-aged son Trey jumped down, ran over to his grandmother, and wrapped her in a bear hug.

"Grandma, I'm so happy to see you. It seems like it's been forever."

"Was it that bad at Aunt Jennifer's?"

Trey released her and took a step back.

"She's really unhappy that you're moving here. Poor Dad. She kept him up past midnight."

They both watched as Michael maneuvered the truck until its back door was lined up to the lower apartment door.

"What did your dad say?"

"You know Dad," Trey said. "He didn't say anything. I mean, what could he do? She's his twin; he had to listen."

"Well, I'm sorry you and your dad had to deal with that."

"It's not your fault. She's not the boss of you. Besides, I put on my earphones and listened to tunes. Dad's the one who had to suffer through it."

"Your Aunt Jennifer needs to let it go."

Trey laughed.

"Like that's going to happen."

Michael rolled up the back door of the truck.

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“Are you going to stand around talking to your grandma all day, or are you going to help me unload?”

Permelia patted Trey on the back then led the way inside.



Michael came into the kitchen as Permelia was unwrapping dinner plates and putting them in a cupboard.

“Katy sent sandwiches if you’re hungry,” she told him.

Michael raised an eyebrow.

“They aren’t that burned tofu stuff, are they?”

Permelia smiled.

“I wouldn’t do that to my work crew. I had her stop by the deli last night and pick up some meat and cheese.”

“Bring ‘em on, then.”

Michael wiped his mouth with the paper towel his mother handed him when he’d finished his first sandwich. He reached across the small kitchen table and flipped up the brim of his son’s baseball cap.

“Did you get enough to eat?”

Trey grinned.

“I’m never full.”

Permelia brought the plate of sandwiches from the kitchen counter back to the table. Michael watched his son devour a half-sandwich in three bites.

“I don’t remember ever being that hungry,” he said with a shake of his head.

“You ate your fair share,” Permelia assured him. “You lot were like a bunch of wild animals at mealtimes.”

“The girls always got the best stuff, though. Anyway, not to change the subject, but have you decided where you want the dining table?”

“I think the apartment is designed to have the right half of the front room be the living room and the left half where you come from the kitchen as the dining room.”

She paused.

“But...” Michael prompted.

“Tell me what you think of this. You know my fiber co-op ladies are keeping our business going at the ranch. I’m going to be spinning here; and if I can manage it, in the kitchen, I’ll do a little custom dying. I also need to do the bookwork and some distribution if I build the business here in the city. You may have noticed I brought two large armoires.”

“I wondered,” Michael interrupted. “They sure aren’t going to fit in either of the bedrooms.”

“They will go on the east wall. I brought that library table to put on the north wall. The two slipper chairs and the small round table should

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face the window, and if you just bring my two larger spinning wheels to the general vicinity, I'll find their spot when everything else is in place."

"And the dining table?" Michael asked.

"I'm going to try it on the north wall in the living room side. Then I'll have the sofa be free-standing, facing the front window with the easy chairs on either side of the window."

Michael stood up.

"Okay, got all that?" he asked Trey.

Trey finished his glass of milk.

"Yes, sir."



Katy stood in the opening between the kitchen and front room and spun around. None of Permelia's other eight children twirled like a top the way Katy did when she was excited. She'd done it since she was a child. Then again, with the exception of the red hair they all had, none of her kids were alike. Not even the twins, who were as different as night and day.

"Mom, this looks great."

Permelia surveyed the boxes and packing materials that covered every available space.

"It's a mess," she proclaimed. "But I agree, it shows promise."

"I didn't realize when we were here before that there's a stacked washer and dryer in one of the bathroom closets," Katy said.

Trey carried a box upstairs and into the front room.

"Where do you want this, Grandma?"

Permelia gestured to the end of the sofa, and Trey set it down.

"Hi, Aunt Katy, can I come to your house tonight?"

Katy smiled.

"Aunt Jennifer hasn't settled down, I take it."

"Nope."

Katy put her arm around his shoulders.

"Unfortunately, I'm behind on my work and will be working late tonight, and no, I can't do it with anyone else there.

He slumped his shoulders and frowned in an exaggerated manner.

"Come on, she's not that bad."

"Easy for you to say."



Michael and Trey awkwardly carried up a large blanket-covered wire cage.

"Where do you want him?" Michael asked.

"Let's take him into my bedroom," Permelia answered. "His litter-box and bed are already set up in there."

A loud yowl came from the cage at the sound of her voice.



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Michael backed into the bedroom.

"Jen wouldn't let us bring him in the house, so he had to sleep in the truck."

"That's why we covered him with the blanket," Trey added. "He was yowling so loud we could hear him with the door shut."

Permelia followed them and lifted the blanket off the cage. Fenton, her Bengal cat, glared at her.

"I'm sure I'll be paying the price for this inconvenience for a few weeks."

Michael went back into the hallway.

"Jose made something for him that might help. Come on, Trey, help me carry them in."

Jose was one of the hands on the family's—now Michael's—wheat ranch. Jose's wife Graciela worked for the fiber co-op Permelia had formed on a twenty-acre piece of property that had been split from the main ranch as part of her divorce settlement. The wives of several ranch hands as well as women from neighboring ranches raised sheep and alpacas on the property and turned the fleeces into custom-dyed wool for spinning as well as finished yarns.

Michael and Trey returned, each carrying a climbing structure made from a thick tree branch. One had two carpet-covered platforms attached to horizontal branches off the main trunk. The other had a light at the top with a switch on the central trunk.

Trey set his down in front of Permelia, wrapping its cord around the base.

"Graciela told Jose how Fenton liked to turn on your light switches, so he decided to make him a light of his own. It's really cool."

"Okay, let's put that one in the front room and leave the other one in here," Permelia directed. "I don't need him turning on lights in the middle of the night when I'm trying to sleep."

Katy arrived as they plugged in the cat-tower lamp. She stood with her hands on her hips as her mother flipped the switch on and off.

"It's certainly a statement piece."

Permelia laughed.

"It's for the cat. Jose built a light switch into it in hopes Fenton will leave mine alone."

"That's a relief—I thought you bought it as a floor lamp."

Michael stepped over to his mother and gave her a hug.

"Trey and I need to hit the road." He looked at his son. "He wants us to drive home tonight, and I can't say I blame him. Call me if you need anything else."

Permelia kissed his cheek.

"And you call me when you're safely home."

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He gave her a salute and stepped back to allow his son space to hug his grandmother. She hugged him and held on to him for a moment.

"You behave yourself and listen to your father."

"I always do, Grandma," he said with a grin.

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## Chapter 3



“Would you like a cup of tea?” Katy asked her mother. “I’m going to make one.”

“That sounds good. I need to sit a few minutes and put my feet up.”

“Go ahead, I’ll bring it in when it’s ready.”

Permelia sat in her overstuffed chair and pulled its matching ottoman closer. Fenton abandoned the empty packing box he was exploring and jumped onto her lap. She stroked his head.

“I know moving is hard,” she crooned. “But it won’t be so bad, you’ll see.”

“Is that how *you* feel?” Katy asked as she handed her mother a cup. “Do you think it won’t be so bad? You know it’s not too late. You could move back to the ranch. Michael said Tomás moved back to Mexico, so his house is available. I know he wouldn’t mind.”

Permelia took the cup and set it on a box beside her chair.

“I’m not going to pretend I’m thrilled about moving seven hours away from my family and the ranch, but you have to play the hand you’re dealt. When your father decided to leave our marriage, I was hurt, but I was dealing with it. When he turned up with a little tart who is two years younger than our youngest child, I was mad. He wouldn’t admit it, but I’m sure he’d been seeing her for months.”

“But, Mom, you’ve always been a fighter. It’s not your style to run away.”

“Honey, if there was something to fight for, I’d be right there.”

“I know I sound like a child, but is there really no hope for you and Daddy? Maybe he’s just having a midlife crisis.”

“Katy, your dad isn’t having a midlife crisis; he and Heather are having a baby. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but it’s going to become ob-

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vious real soon, and your dad clearly hasn't chosen to spread the happy news."

"I can't believe it." She buried her face in her hands. "Dad's having a baby! Aren't we enough for him?"

Permelia hated to upset her daughter. She'd always been so close to her father, but it was clear she'd had no clue about his new relationship.

"He should be the one who moves," Katy announced.

Permelia laughed.

"So, you'd rather have your dad and Heather and your new sibling live in your town instead of me?"

Katy sipped her tea and sat in the chair beside her mother.

"I see your point."

"In reality, I think the change will do me good."

"As long as Jennifer doesn't drive you crazy," Katy said and laughed. "Or put you in a home," she added.

Permelia shook her head.

"That's not going to happen."

"Does Michael know? Or for that matter, do any of the others know we're about to add to our numbers?"

Fenton head-butted Permelia's hand when she stopped petting him to reach for her tea.

"Michael knows. Your father asked him if he could stay in Tomás's house."

"You're kidding. Is Michael going to let him?"

"No, he isn't."

"How did Dad take that?"

"Your brother told him he was pretty sure the house had lead paint and maybe asbestos, and it wouldn't be a healthy place for Heather to live while she's pregnant, and it certainly wouldn't be safe for a new baby."

"That was clever of him."

"It's probably true, but your brother didn't want to appear to be taking sides."

Katy slumped back in her chair.

"Mom, I'm really sorry Dad is being such a jerk. I can't even imagine how betrayed you must feel."

Permelia sighed.

"When your dad and I got married we had great hopes and dreams for our future. And we agreed on what we wanted—the ranch, lots of kids, everything. As you-all grew up and left home, I started working with the fiber co-op. At the same time your dad started transferring the running of the ranch to your brother."

"Let me see if I understand where this is going," Katy said. "We left home leaving you guys with an empty nest. You filled your nest with help-

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ing the wives of the ranch workers start the fiber co-op. Dad filled his with starting another family with somebody young enough to be his daughter."

Once Permelia had gotten over the initial shock of finding out the only man she'd ever loved no longer loved her, she'd decided that, no matter how hurt she felt, and no matter how easy it would be, she wasn't going to be one of those women who poisoned their kids against their father. No matter what he did.

Katy got up and stood in front of the big window.

"I know he's my father, but you're my mother, and I can't stand the way he treated you."

"Sweetie, I know your father didn't handle things the best way he could have, but..." Permelia had to pause to choke back tears. She took a deep breath. "If your dad no longer loves me, we need to get on with our separate lives. We will always be your parents, and we both love you kids. That's what matters now."

Katy came to her mother's chair and leaned down to give her a hug. Fenton reached up and swatted her with his paw when she came in range. Permelia grabbed the paw before he could latch on.

"You stop that," she said and attempted a laugh.

Katy wrapped her arms around her mother and kissed her cheek before returning to her chair.

"I know you're taking the high road for us kids' sake, but Dad's acting like a jerk. I'm mad at him, and I think it's okay if you're mad at him, too."

"I'll admit, I was hurt when I found out, but staying mad at your dad and his new family only hurts me. He's moved on, and that's what I intend to do."

"You're a better person than I am."

Permelia reached over and patted Katy's hand.

"Not better, just older. I don't have time to stay mad at anyone."

Katy stood up again.

"I hate to leave you, but I've got to do some sketches for a new commission piece."

"Anything interesting?"

"Not really. A family wants a bust of their dearly departed grandfather for the foyer of their McMansion. Not my favorite thing, but it pays the bills."

Permelia stood up, lifting Fenton off her lap and setting him back in her chair.

"Fen and I have a lot of unpacking to keep us busy. We'll be just fine."

"Call if you need anything."



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## Chapter 4



It was still light out when Permelia finished eating one of the sandwiches left over from lunch. Fenton sat on the chair opposite her at the kitchen table.

“What do you think, Fen,” she asked. “Would you like to take a short walk around the block? I haven’t scouted it out yet, so we might encounter dogs.”

Fenton meowed. Bengal cats were known to be chatty, and he was no exception.

It took three tries before she found the box with his harness and leash. She had worked with him and the harness since he was a kitten, and he knew as soon as she pulled it out and untangled it that an adventure was soon to follow. He paced by the door as she patted her pockets to make sure she had her keys and phone, meowing to be sure she knew he was ready to go.

“Allright, let’s see what we can learn about our new neighborhood.”

They circled their own block first to avoid having to cross a street until she was sure how Fenton was going to deal with an urban environment. He handled it as though he’d been born in the city. Emboldened by his confidence, she picked him up and carried him across the street, setting him back down when they were opposite their parking lot. They were almost to the corner when a voice called out from behind a brick wall, “What sort of cat is that?”

Permelia looked around, not sure where the voice had come from.

“Over here,” the voice said, and she noticed a thick oak-plank door with heavy iron hinges set into the wall. An iron grill covered a small speakeasy door set at eye level. She stepped over to look through the opening.

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The speaker was a woman with graying dreadlocks and dark brown eyes.

Permelia picked Fenton up so he wouldn't be squished when the door opened.

"He's a Bengal."

"Is that some sort of exotic?"

Permelia smiled. She got that question a lot.

"No, it's a domestic breed. They *were* created by crossing Asian cats, who are a wild breed, with domestic cats. But that's at least four generations back."

"Are you the new tenant at the morgue?" the woman asked.

"Yes, I am. I'm Permelia O'Brien, and I just moved in today. You are...?"

"I'm sorry, what must you think of me? I'm Wilma Granger, and I've lived here pretty much forever."

"Nice to meet you, Wilma."

"Was that a spinning wheel I saw your men carrying into your apartment?"

Permelia smiled.

"It was. I actually have two of them—three if you count the electric one."

"Would you like to come inside?" Wilma asked.

"Are there other animals?"

"Not in the garden. I have birds in the house, but nothing out here."

"In that case, we would love to come in."



The speakeasy grill closed, and Permelia heard the muffled clicking of locks before the heavy door opened. She stepped through the opening and stopped. Wilma was a tall woman, dressed in a bright green-and-purple-and-pink silk duster over wide-legged black pants. Dreadlocks ended in beads that matched the colors in the shirt. She had the sort of ageless face that suggested she could be in her forties or her sixties; Permelia couldn't tell.

Trying not to stare at Wilma, Permelia turned her attention to the courtyard she'd stepped into.

"This is..." Permelia was speechless.

Wilma smiled.

"My little world has that effect on people."

"It's breathtaking. I'm not sure if I'm more amazed by the exotic plants, the intricate tilework, or the sculptures. The outer wall doesn't give a hint of the beauty you've created in here."

"Come in and look around."

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Permelia strolled along the stone path.

The tilework looked Italian, as did the sculptures. The plants were more Amazon jungle. The house was large, two stories or maybe three—she couldn't tell from this angle. The house and garden consumed an entire block and must have been built in an age when there was still room to have such space in the city.

"I can't take credit for most of it. My grandmother collected the artwork and some of the tiles in Italy. She was more into orchids, and had a special room built for them in the house. I killed off a number of them before I got the hang of keeping them alive, if not thriving." She made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "The rest of this stuff is mostly grocery-store variety plants gone wild."

"It's fantastic, in any case."

"Can I get you some iced tea?" Wilma asked when they arrived at a flagstone patio outside a leaded glass door. She gestured to a glass-topped bistro table and chair set, and Permelia sat.

"No, thank you, if I drink tea now, I'll be up all night. Water would be nice."

"I'll be right back."

She returned with two glasses, setting one in front of Permelia and sitting down as she took a sip out of the other.

"Tell me about those spinning wheels."

"I started a small women's co-op on our wheat ranch with some of the wives of the ranch hands. We have sheep and alpacas and a few angora goats. We collect the fiber and then spin it and dye it and sell it to a few yarn stores and online."

Wilma pulled back and gave Permelia a long look.

"Well, my, my, my, you're full of surprises. Here I'm thinking you're a sweet little retired lady and really you're a business mogul."

Permelia's cheeks turned pink.

"I'm hardly that. As my kids grew up and left home, I had a little time on my hands. We grow wheat on the family ranch; but there was a parcel that wasn't suitable for growing, so I got the idea that maybe we could get a few animals and play around. We had a group of ranch hands who had been with us for years, and their kids were leaving home, too. The wives and I and some of our daughters had been knitting together for years, and we'd always joked around about growing our own yarn. Then one day it wasn't a joke, and we sold our first skeins of yarn."

"I always wanted to learn to knit," Wilma said wistfully.

"It's not too late to start."

"I don't know about that."

Fenton jumped off Permelia's lap and strolled across a stone path to a small pool with a fountain in its center. He sniffed the water's surface.

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"Oh. No, you don't, mister," she told him and started to reel in his leash. She was too late.

"He can't hurt anything," Wilma assured her, but Permelia stood up and grabbed for her cat.

Fenton was quicker, and jumped into the water before she could stop him. The water was deeper than he'd expected, and he submerged briefly before resurfacing, sputtering and shaking his head, his front feet paddling as Permelia lifted him out of the pool.

"I'm so sorry," she said and set him on the walk.

Wilma laughed.

"I've never seen such a thing. Let me go get him a towel."

"I don't want to trouble you. He'll be fine until we get home."

"Nonsense. I'll be right back."

"Now you've done it," she told the cat when Wilma was out of sight. "Just when we were getting to know the neighbors, you had to go and make a mess of things."

Wilma came back with a large towel and handed it to Permelia.

"I didn't know cats liked water," she said as she sat back down at the table.

Permelia put the towel in her lap and set Fenton in the middle of it, rubbing him with the ends.

"Some breeds do, and others don't. Bengal cats are in the do category."

"Well, I'm glad, because he's brought me a much-needed laugh."

Permelia waited to see if she would say anything else.

"I'm sorry. I've been a little tense lately. Someone has been...I'm not sure what you would call it. Trying to break in, I guess. This place is such a fortress someone would have to resort to serious methods to breach the wall, but I think someone's been trying."

"What makes you think that?"

"There are scratches on the outside lock, as if someone's been trying to pick it. Before she passed, my grandmother had state-of-the-art locks installed, so they're virtually pick-proof. The key resembles a piece of chain.

"The other night I heard a noise that sounded like a drill. I checked the security camera, and someone in dark clothing was attempting to drill around the lock. The door is made from ipe, which is a South American wood that's twice as dense as most woods and five times harder. A normal drill bit wouldn't make a dent. And the middle of the door has a steel plate, in any case."

"Have you talked to the police?"

"Unfortunately, my grandmother burned that bridge years ago. A few too many calls with nothing found put her on the crank caller list."

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"I don't mean to be nosy, but all these defenses strike me as pretty extreme. Was your grandmother protecting something?"

"That's the crazy thing. Other than telling me never to let my guard down, she never explained. I have no idea why she made this place such a fortress. I've always thought she was just eccentric, but now that someone's been trying to get in, I'm starting to wonder."

"I wish I had an idea to offer," Permelia said.

They sat in silence while she finished toweling her cat off.

"I'd better get this scalawag home," she said and lifted him off the towel.

"You can take the towel. He might get a chill if he's not wrapped up."

"Oh, thank you. I'll have it back tomorrow."

"No rush."

Permelia stood up, wrapping Fenton as she did so. Wilma rose.

"You said it's not too late for me to learn to knit. Would you be willing to teach me?"

"After all the trouble we've been, it's the least I can do for you. My apartment is still a bit of a mess..."

"If you don't mind, could we do it here? I work from home, and people call at all hours. If we meet here, I can listen for the phone."

"I need to be home in the evenings for the morgue phone, but if we can do it during the day, that would work fine."

"It's a date, then. Just let me know when you're ready." Wilma pulled a card from a pocket hidden in the voluminous folds of fabric that made up her tunic. "Here's my phone number. Call, and I'll meet you at the gate."

Permelia pocketed the card.

"Speaking of the morgue phone, I'd better get back and check for messages. They told me I don't have to sit home all the time, but I don't want to miss anything if I can help it."

Wilma led her to the gate and pulled a ring with several strange-looking keys on it from her pocket. Permelia watched her new friend open a series of four locks like nothing she had ever seen before swinging the door open.

As she carried Fenton home, Permelia wondered if Wilma's grandmother had been merely eccentric, or if she had hidden something behind that wall that was worth going to such lengths to protect.



Permelia barely had time to remove Fenton's harness before he ran up the stairs to their apartment door. Her foot slipped as she started to follow, and she realized she'd stepped on a piece of paper lying on the entry floor. It was folded to fit through the mail slot in the door. She picked it up and blew out a breath as she read the four-word sentence.



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## YOU dON't bE\_lONG hERE!

Fenton paced in front of the door at the top of the stairs and meowed insistently. Permelia folded the piece of paper, stuffed it in her pants pocket, and climbed the stairs.

"Well, Mr. Cat, it would appear at least one person doesn't want us here."

Fenton meowed loudly and went into the kitchen, bumping his dish with his nose in case she wasn't reading his signals correctly.

"Okay, okay. I get it. You don't care about the letter, you're hungry after your swim in the neighbor's pond."

It took two tries to find his food and the scoop that went in the container, neither of which were in the box where his harness had been, but eventually she had his placemat situated on the kitchen floor with his bowl of food and water and he was able to eat his dinner.

She made a cup of herb tea for herself and took it to the chair by the window. She pulled the paper from her pocket and examined it. She hadn't expected a parade to welcome her to the neighborhood, but somehow, she hadn't expected something like this note, either.

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## Chapter 5



Dr. Grace had told Permelia night calls weren't a frequent occurrence and not to be surprised if days or even weeks passed before she got her first, so she was surprised when the phone rang while she was reading in bed that first night. She asked the questions on the checklist he'd given her and verified that the body in question was indeed going to come to the morgue that night. As they had prearranged, she called Dr. Grace as soon as she hung up.

"I'll be right in," he assured her; and true to his word, she saw his car pull into the parking lot fifteen minutes later. She went downstairs and met him at the morgue door.

He smiled when he saw her.

"I was hoping you'd have a few days to get settled in before you had to deal with any night calls, but our business is unpredictable."

"I don't mind. I just hope I did it right."

"I'm sure you did. I mean, someone being found in the middle of the night in the woods with head trauma isn't likely to have died from natural causes. Sure, people can have a branch fall and hit them on the head, but not usually in the middle of the night. It's important we secure any and all evidence."

"Will you do the autopsy tonight?"

He smiled.

"No, that's the great part of being a pathologist. In spite of what you might see on television, Tony will check him onsite and then bring him here, and we'll get him in the cooler, but his exam can wait until tomorrow."



It took an hour, but finally an ambulance turned onto the street.

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"We'll probably be done here in thirty minutes or less."

"I'll be on my way, then,"

Dr. Grace smiled at her.

"Congratulations on handling your first call."

Permelia walked back around to her entrance door and let herself in. The ambulance left soon after, and Dr. Grace was gone less than thirty minutes later. It would be several more hours, though, before Permelia managed to fall asleep.



Katy arrived early the next morning, a white bakery bag stamped with *Helen Bernhard Bakery* in her hand. She carried it to the kitchen table and then put the teakettle on.

"I have to visit a new client on this end of town this morning, so I thought I'd come by and see how you and Fenton did your first night in your new home."

Permelia told her about her first night call as Katy bustled around the kitchen and found teacups, saucers, and plates.

"Oh, and before that I took the cat for a walk, and we met our neighbor across the street. She lives in a bit of a fortress."

"A fortress? You're kidding, right?"

"Not really. The house is behind a solid stone wall a couple of feet thick and probably ten feet tall. And has a pretty sophisticated security system."

"That's strange."

"Not as strange as this," Permelia said and handed her the note that had been slipped through her mail slot.

"That's frightening. Have you called the police?"

"A prank note is not worthy of a call to the police, and I forgot to tell Dr. Grace about it last night. I will when I see him again. They never mentioned what happened to the previous tenant. Maybe they were asked to leave and aren't happy about it."

"Let me know what he says."

"Tell me about your new client," Permelia said, changing the subject.

They finished their tea and doughnuts, and Permelia walked Katy down to the parking lot. She watched as she pulled out and a Mercedes sedan pulled in. It was parked, and a pencil-thin woman in a gray wool suit got out and hurried to the front of the building. A boy of about twelve got out of the car and followed her, hurrying to keep up.

Permelia had put the note in her pocket, intending to speak to Dr. Grace right away, but she changed her mind, thinking the people might be the family of the dead man.

She spent the rest of the morning unpacking; and before she knew it, it was lunchtime and her kitchen was functional, but devoid of food.

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"Fenton, you hold down the fort while I see if I can find the grocery store that's supposed to be three blocks from here."

She picked up her reusable grocery bag and headed out. As she started across the parking lot, she saw something colorful lying in front of the garbage cans. She walked over and picked up a knitted cap. Someone had apparently intended to throw it in the garbage but missed the can. She put it in her bag and continued on her way.

"Permelia," called Wilma as she passed the oak door. "How'd your first night go?"

The iron speakeasy grill was open, and Permelia could see Wilma's face behind the grate.

"Looks like you're headed for the grocery, do you have time for a cup of coffee?"

"I suppose I could stop for a little while."

Wilma opened the door and ushered her in, locking it behind her, before leading her along the path, across the patio, and through the back door into the kitchen.

"Is coffee okay? I can make tea if you'd prefer."

"Coffee is fine," Permelia answered as she took a seat at the kitchen table. "Your kitchen is beautiful."

Wilma glanced at the pumpkin-colored walls and the blue, orange, and yellow Italian tilework that covered the countertops, backsplash, and part of the floor.

"I read a memoir about a woman's love affair with Italy and decided to give my kitchen an Italian makeover."

"Did you do the work yourself?"

Wilma smiled.

"Why, yes, I did. What gave it away?"

"Your expression when you look at it. It was obviously a labor of love."

"I am pretty pleased with it. I spend a lot of time in this house, so it needs to please me."

Wilma handed Permelia a mug of coffee and set a small blue pitcher of cream on the table next to a matching sugar bowl.

"Did I hear a guest arrive at the morgue last night?"

Permelia stirred cream into her coffee.

"My first call. Dr. Grace had instructed me to call him the first few times no matter what, but this one was pretty clear. I'm not sure I can say anything about what happened."

"That's okay, I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Did you know the person or persons who lived in my apartment before me?"

Wilma sat down opposite her.

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"I can't say that I did. I mean, I recognized the woman when she'd walked by, but that's it. Why do you ask?"

Permelia took a sip of her coffee to avoid answering. Wilma seemed friendly enough, but there was always the possibility *she* was the author of the note. But then she recalled the note was delivered while she was out walking, and Wilma would have had to hurry to slip it through the mail slot and return to her courtyard to be behind the big door when Permelia and Fenton walked by.

"Someone slipped a note through my mail slot while I was walking Fenton last night."

"By your expression, I assume it wasn't a 'welcome to the neighborhood' message?"

Permelia smiled.

"Quite the contrary. It said, 'You don't belong here'."

Wilma covered her mouth with her hand and thought.

"I'm pretty sure the last occupant of your apartment was a student at the local seminary. The mailman said she had a lot of mail related to her graduation in the weeks before she moved."

"So, it doesn't sound like she'd have any reason to be trying to scare me off."

"I haven't heard of anyone having that sort of problem in the past, but not to state the obvious, you do live over a morgue. It could make anyone who lives there a target of pranksters."

Permelia leaned back in her chair.

"I suppose."

A kitchen timer rang, and Wilma got up and pulled a tray of biscotti from the oven.

"Perfect timing. Would you like a fresh-baked biscotti to go with your coffee?"

"That sounds lovely," Permelia said with a smile.



After a second cup of coffee and two biscotti, Permelia got up and carried her empty cup to the sink. She picked up her grocery bag and remembered the hat she'd found on her way over to Wilma's.

"I found a knitted cap by the dumpster when I was leaving. I stuffed it in my bag without looking at it." She pulled the hat out.

Wilma examined it.

"It looks handmade."

Permelia held it up and rubbed her hand over an area of textured knitting.

"Huh," she said, and stretched the hat to better display the textured area.

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“What?”

“This blue tweedy fiber is *my* yarn.”

“Your yarn? What do you mean? Does this have to do with that coop you were telling me about?”

“Yes, this is yarn we make and sell. I’m pretty sure I spun this one.”

“How can you tell?” Wilma asked her, clearly fascinated.

“I had a hard time getting the exact blue I wanted. I’d know it anywhere. We labeled it OOAC—one of a kind. It only went to one or two stores.”

“That’s quite a coincidence, don’t you think? The yarn you spun in your coop in Washington ends up here?”

“My yarn is only sold in the Northwest, but you’re right, it’s still a coincidence.”

“I don’t mean to be nosey, but won’t it be difficult to keep running your business from here?”

“There will be challenges, but I think it will work. Besides, I don’t really have a choice.” She glanced at her watch. She wasn’t really in a hurry. She had nothing else but more unpacking to do this afternoon, but she wasn’t ready to share the whole sordid tale of her divorce and her ex-husband’s impending fatherhood just yet.

“I need to get to the store. I’ll have to save that story for another time. Thank you so much for the coffee and biscotti. It was delicious.”

Wilma walked her to the door and then the gate.

“I hope you’ll come join me again.”

Permelia stepped back out on the sidewalk and could hear the locks clicking into place as she walked away.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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